

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
For the Montana National Register of Historic Places Program and State Antiquities Database

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
Montana Historical Society
PO Box 201202, 1410 8th Ave
Helena, MT 59620-1202

Property Address: **600 N. Park Avenue**

Historic Address (if applicable): **201/203 Gilbert St.**

City/Town: **Helena**

Site Number: **24 LC 2195**

(An historic district number may also apply.)

County: **Lewis & Clark County**

Historic Name: **Western Life Insurance Company**

Original Owner(s): **Western Life Insurance Company**

Current Ownership ☒ Private ☐ Public

Current Property Name: **Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks**

Owner(s): **Michael & Colleen Casey**

Owner Address: **PO Box 1067
Helena, MT 59624-1067**

Phone: **(406) 443-3033**

Legal Location: **Thompson Placer PM2 N 136' LT 5**

PM: **Montana** Township: **10N** Range: **3W**

NW ¼ NW ¼ SW ¼ of Section: **30**

Lot(s): **Unknown**

Block(s): **Unknown**

Addition: **Thompson Placer** Year of Addition: **1888**

USGS Quad Name: **Helena** Year: **1985**

Tax ID **05-1888-30-2-08-25-0000**

Historic Use: **Office building**

Current Use: **Office building**

Construction Date: **1961** ☐ Estimated ☒ Actual

☒ Original Location ☐ Moved Date Moved:

UTM Reference www.nris.mt.gov/topofinder2

☐ NAD 27

☒ NAD 83 (preferred)

Zone: **12** Easting: **420262** Northing: **5160545**

National Register of Historic Places

NRHP Listing Date: **NA**

Historic District: **NA**

NRHP Eligible: ☒ Yes ☐ No

Date of this document: **November 13, 2009**

Form Prepared by: **Diana J. Painter, PhD**

Address: **3518 N. C Street, Spokane, WA 99205**

Daytime Phone: **(509)290-5161**

MT SHPO USE ONLY

Eligible for NRHP: ☒ yes ☐ no

Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Date: **11/16/2010**

Evaluator: **Kate Hampton**

Comments:

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Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

Site Number: **24 LC 2195**

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

X See Additional Information Page

Architectural Style: **Modern** If Other, specify:

Property Type: **Commercial** Specific Property Type: **Office building**

Architect: Architectural Firm/City/State: **Morrison-Maierle & Associates, Helena, MT**

Builder/Contractor: **Waddell Construction Co.** Company/City/State: **Helena, MT**

Source of Information: **City building records**

The building at 600 N. Park Avenue, which was built by the Western Life Insurance Company in 1961, is a one-and-two-story building with a T-shaped footprint and a flat roof. It is located in the north corner of a somewhat wedge-shaped urban block in Helena bounded by N. Park Avenue/Gilbert Street on the north; N. Park Avenue on the east; W. Placer Avenue on the south; and W. Benton Avenue on the west. The building faces east onto N. Park Avenue and Hill Park beyond. To the north are Yund Park and the Helena Civic Center building, and to the south is the (former) main Western Life Insurance Company building.

The building is a concrete masonry and curtain wall structure with a combination of finishing materials, including brick veneer, ceramic tile, metal panels, polished granite veneer, and concrete screen block. It has a concrete foundation and a built-up roof. It was designed by Morrison-Maierle & Associates in the Modern style.

Massing and design. The building massing consists of a one-story, rectangular form that abuts a two-story rectangular form at about the center point of its long face. The primary entry to the building is on the east façade, where the one-story south wing joins the two-story north wing at a 90 degree angle. The entrance is at-grade, accessed via a concrete walkway extending from the sidewalk at Park Avenue. A small entry vestibule of aluminum and glass leads to what was likely the original entry, which features an aluminum door with full height glass with a broad transom and sidelight to the right. This entry is located in the same plane as the metal and glass curtain wall that characterizes the rest of the east façade on this wing. Deep eaves with a sloped soffit shelter this curtain wall. An aluminum fascia with gravel stops finishes the roofline. This curtain wall is repeated on the west side of this wing. The south end wall of wing is concrete masonry with a brick veneer. It extends slightly above the adjacent fascia and is finished with a simple metal coping.

The two-story wing of the building is centered at the north endwall of the one-story wing. This portion of the structure is clad in a polished pink granite veneer that wraps around the building, encasing roughly the easterly third of the wing on the south facade from grade to the metal coping at the top. The westerly portion of the wing is clad in brick veneer on the south, west and east faces. This brick veneer also enframes a two-story curtain wall on the east half of the north façade. A narrow metal coping finishes this wing. All finish materials extend from building grade to the coping, with the exception of this north façade, where the slightly raised, concrete foundation is visible. A concrete screen wall on the south façade of this wing at the second level encloses a secondary entry.

Secondary entrances to the building occur in several locations. A concrete stair leads from the sidewalk along Benton Avenue down to an entry to the one-story wing on the west facade; this consists of a single aluminum-frame door with full-height glass. Another entry in this location is at the lower level of the two-story wing, consisting of an ensemble made up of an aluminum-frame, full-height glass door on the right and a full-height fixed light flanked by narrow, one-over-one-light windows, the small windows near the sill being operable. Perpendicular to this window wall is a flush metal door leading to a storage or mechanical area under the stairs.

Another secondary entry is located directly above the entry described above, accessed by another concrete stair and a concrete walkway with aluminum metal rail, leading to a flush metal door within the concrete screen wall entry vestibule. A three-part window on the south façade along the walkway consists of a central fixed light flanked by two one-over-one-light windows, with a fixed upper portion and small operable awning-style window below. This ensemble is in vertical alignment with the entry below.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

A fourth entry is located along the sidewalk on Benton Avenue. This entry is composed of a single, aluminum-frame door flanked by full-height, fixed light windows surmounted by a broad transom. This leads to an interior stair to the second level.

Materials and finishes. Among the most interesting features of this building are the various finishes with their patterns, textures and colors. The curtain wall on the one-story wing has three bays with a 4-5-4 vertical fenestration pattern. The horizontal pattern consists of a central ribbon window with a slightly blue tint, and a row of turquoise insulated metal panels above and below. The vertical panels in this window wall are separated by 3" deep aluminum mullions, with the bays separated by wider mullions.

The brick veneer is described as a "Norman face brick" in the specifications. It is set in a running bond pattern and displays an irregular pattern of orange and yellow bricks with a smooth finish. Contrasting with the brick is the polished surface of the granite veneer, which occurs in large panels and is primarily pink and black in color.

The curtain wall on the north façade of the building is arranged in three bays of glass and metal panels separated and flanked by five vertical panels of small, ceramic tiles, for a vertical rhythm of 1-3-2-3-2-3-1. There are three window walls on each floor. Window walls on the first and second floors are separated by turquoise metal spandrel panels. Each window wall is made up of a full-height, central fixed light flanked by a narrow, two-light window with a small, operable light below. The ceramic tiles are arranged in a random color pattern of beige, brown and pale gray, with gray dominating the field. This entire ensemble is enframed within a band of polished gray granite that is 5" wide and 6" deep. The brick veneer that enframes this ensemble and makes up the rest of this façade is arranged in a random pattern of yellow and orange.

Details. The building retains a number of details that offer subtle counterpoints to the larger-scaled design elements. A colored tile with the Western Life Insurance Company logo is located within the granite wall to the right of the main entry. The details of the aluminum stair rail on the concrete stair to the rear of the building are unusual. Although the interior does not have direct bearing on the historic significance of the building, it is worth noting that the interior retains much of its blond wood paneling and what appears to be original light fixtures are located in the entry hall on the west side of the north wing.

Landscaping and site features. The lot on which the building is located slopes slightly up toward Benton Avenue, but access to the east and west side of the building occurs at about the same grade as the Park Avenue entrance. An asphalt and concrete drive and parking area extends from the southeast corner of the site and wraps around the site from the south to the west. The westerly portion is used for an outdoor eating area. The southerly portion is used for a parking lot. Landscaping on the east and north sides consists primarily of lawn. Mature street trees occur along Gilbert Street to the west.

Changes over time. Relatively few changes have been made to the building, according to building permit files and by visual inspection. When the building was occupied by Western Life Insurance Company signs in free-standing letters spelled out "Western Life" on the upper left hand corner of the Park Avenue façade and the upper right hand corner of the Gilbert Street façade. Additionally, the entry on the N. Benton Avenue façade displayed the sign "Western Life Pow Wow Room," as this entry led to the building's conference room. The sign on the N. Park Avenue façade has been replaced with "600 N. Park." The granite has been damaged in this location as a result.

Tenant improvements were made in 1983 when James Burrington, who operated his insurance company from this building, made changes to accommodate his real estate business. A small entry vestibule appears to have been added at the main entry. The gravel on the built-up roof was removed in 2001 and a new coating applied to the roof. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks took over the building about 1999, but made few changes.

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Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Architectural Context

The building at 600 N. Park Avenue displays a number of features that identify it with modern architecture and more specifically, with *curtain wall construction at mid-twentieth century*. The simple rectilinear forms, flat roof, and simple detailing identify the building with the Modern style, in addition to the date of the building. Curtain wall construction, which technically refers to a structural system and specific use of materials, became closely associated with a particular aesthetic expression in the post-war era as well (*Purdon, 2008:107*). This building is a good example of the stylistic features of curtain wall construction, in addition to the features discussed below.

The building at 600 N. Park Avenue represents several important ideas about contemporary commercial and institutional design in the post-war era. One was the three-dimensional arrangement of forms as part of the architectural expression of the building. While this is a relatively simple building, the juxtaposition of a one-story and two-story volume, and the additional emphasis at the joint of these forms in the form of the second story entry feature on the south façade, forms a three-dimensional composition that is representative of the more sculptural interpretations of modern design.

Another idea that was prevalent at the time was the importance of the two dimensional composition on any one surface as a design feature. This composition was typically asymmetrical and did not, as in traditional architecture, serve mainly to emphasize the building form. Rather, it was another design feature that might express the interior functions of the building. As an aesthetic device, it might also facilitate a three-dimensional 'reading' of the building form, much like the flat surface of a cubist painting describes to the viewer how to read the three-dimensional form of the object portrayed in the painting.

A third 'modern' idea that is particularly pronounced in this building is that the pattern, texture, color, reflectivity, and other visual aspects of the building materials are also decorative features. As in many modern structures, they take the place of traditional architectural detailing in embellishing the building. The juxtaposition of polished granite and dull, smooth brick, the repetition of simple metal frames and pattern of small ceramic tiles, and the tinted glass and colored metal panels are the 'decoration.' They express or represent the building's function, its structure and its aesthetic appearance, and speak to new possibilities in materials and construction in the post-war era.

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Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

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HISTORY OF PROPERTY

X See Additional Information Page

Previous buildings at this location. The Western Life Insurance Company building in this location was preceded by a small gas station built of hollow core clay tile that faced onto Gilbert Street. In the 1950s a larger service station in this location faced onto N. Park Avenue. This was demolished in 1961 by contractor George Sigety to make way for the Western Life Insurance Company building. Prior to this, in 1952, Helena architect Sigvald L. Berg had designed a steel frame office building for this location, a proposal that was rejected by the city in 1955 (*City of Helena building permit records*).

Development of 600 N. Park. The building permit for 600 N. Park Avenue building was issued on November 1, 1961 to Waddell Construction Company on behalf of the Western Life Insurance Company. The overall dimensions of the T-shaped building were to be 24' wide by 40' long, with a total square footage of 3,330 square feet. The tallest point of the building was to be 20' in height, and the value of the construction was estimated at \$93,423 (*City of Helena building permit records*).

The Western Life Insurance Company. The Western Life Insurance Company was founded in Helena on June 20, 1910 under the name "Montana Life Insurance Company." At that time it had two employees and operated out of two rented rooms. In 1928 the company moved to its third home, at Fuller and W. Lawrence, considered "one of the most imposing [buildings] in the Capital city" (*Bartech, 1950:1:1*). The company changed its name to Western Life Insurance Company on February 7, 1938. In 1950, as noted on the occasion of its 40th anniversary, the company operated in Montana, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, California and North Dakota and employed 300 men (no mention was made of the number of women it employed).

Construction began on the company's new modern headquarters building at 560 N. Park Avenue in 1954 (it is occupied by Montana Blue Cross Blue Shield today). The building was four stories high, with over 576,000 square feet of space. At the dedication ceremony on July 14, 1956, company president R. B. Richardson announced, "We at Western Life, by the erection of what we believe to be one of the most modern office buildings in the country, are further exemplifying our faith in the future of our great state and of the west in general." Nonetheless, the company announced in 1959 that it would be moving its headquarters to St. Paul and constructing a new head office with St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company, an affiliate since 1957. After joining with the St. Paul company, Western Life offered a broader array of products in 40 states, and felt it needed to operate from a more central location than Montana.

About 120 of the company's 200 employees moved to St. Paul with their families in 1960-61. In order to accommodate what was now a branch office in Helena; the company constructed what it described as a "small but attractive" office building at 600 N. Park Avenue.

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X See Additional Information Page

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"Western Life Opens New Home Office Building," *The Independent Record*, July 8, 1958:1.

"Western Life Will Move Offices in '61," *The Independent Record*, April 9, 1959:1.

"Western Life Will Not Disappear from Helena," *The Independent Record*, August 13, 1961:17.

Interviews

Mike Casey, Trimac Group (building owner), Helena, MT, November 12, 2009.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

NRHP Listing Date:

Evaluated Under Criterion C only – more research required for A, B, of D eligibility

NRHP Eligibility: ☒ Yes ☐ No ☒ Individually ☐ Contributing to Historic District ☐ Noncontributing to Historic District

NRHP Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Area of Significance: **Commercial architecture** Period of Significance: **1961**

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

☐ See Additional Information Page

The building at 600 N. Park Avenue is significant for its architectural design, for embodying the distinctive characteristics of a period and method of construction, and as a building that possesses high artistic values (Criterion C). Six hundred North Park Avenue is a good example of curtain wall construction, specifically the stylistic qualities of curtain wall construction that characterized mid-century commercial and institutional design. Additional stylistic aspects of the small scale building that typify the era include the building form, the asymmetrical, two-dimensional composition of individual facades, and the use of materials. Singular aspects of the building include the number of materials and colors utilized on the building and its sculptural quality. While this variety might ordinarily lead to visual confusion, this building and its detailing have withstood the test of time, a testament to its design. An additional consideration in the historic value of the building is that it was designed by Morrison-Maierle & Associates, whose architectural arm is now represented by CWG Architects (Crossman, Whitney & Griffin), and who have been in business in Helena for over 50 years (*Personal communication, Mike Casey, November 12, 2009*)

INTEGRITY

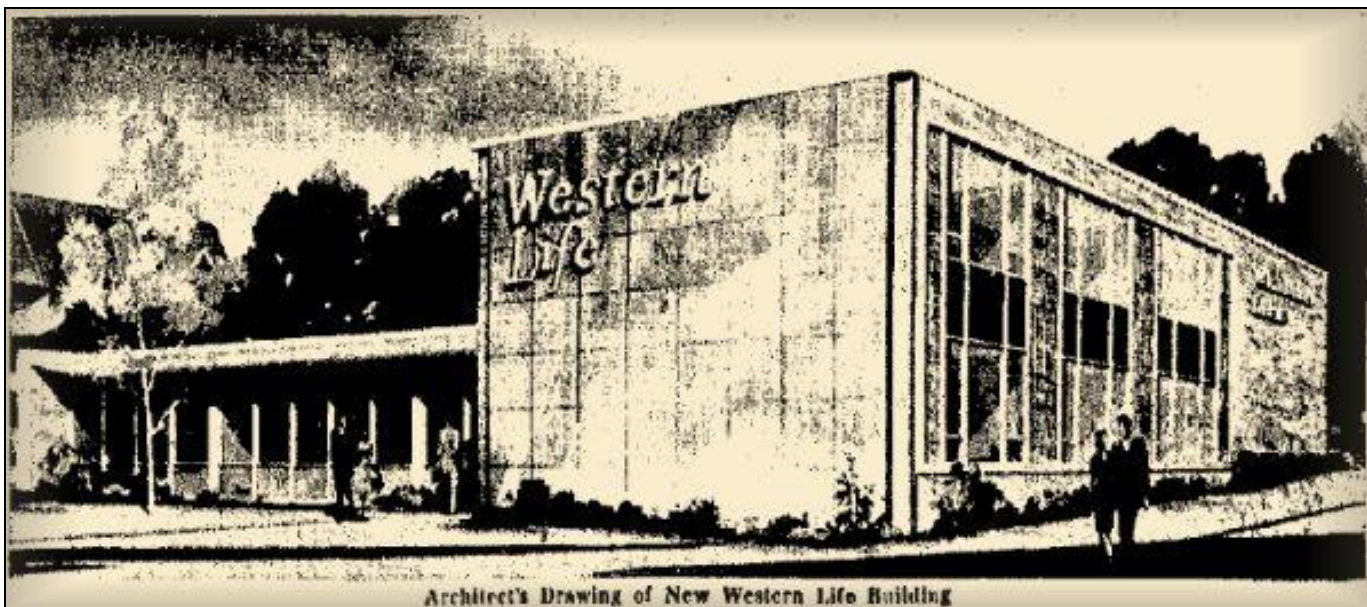
The building retains integrity of location, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. While some minor aspects of the setting may have been altered, it appears that most of the major buildings and open spaces that characterize this urban setting are still extant and intact. Minor changes may have taken place to the site and therefore the immediate setting, but the building's location in a small, wedge-shaped lot ensures that only minor changes are possible and therefore the setting remains largely intact.

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Newspaper illustration from opening of new Western Life Building

Source: "Helena as She Was, Images of Montana's Capital City"

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

Site Number: **24 LC 2195**



Description: **South and east facades, November 5, 2009; facing northwest**



Description: **West and south facades, November 5, 2009; facing northeast**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

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Description: **North façade, November 5, 2009; facing south**



Description: **North and west (north end) facades, November 6, 2009; facing southeast**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

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Description: **Western Life logo near main entrance, November 6, 2009**



Description: **Stair railing details, west façade, November 6, 2009**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

Site Number: **24 LC 2195**



Description: **Materials details, north façade, lower left corner, November 6, 2009**

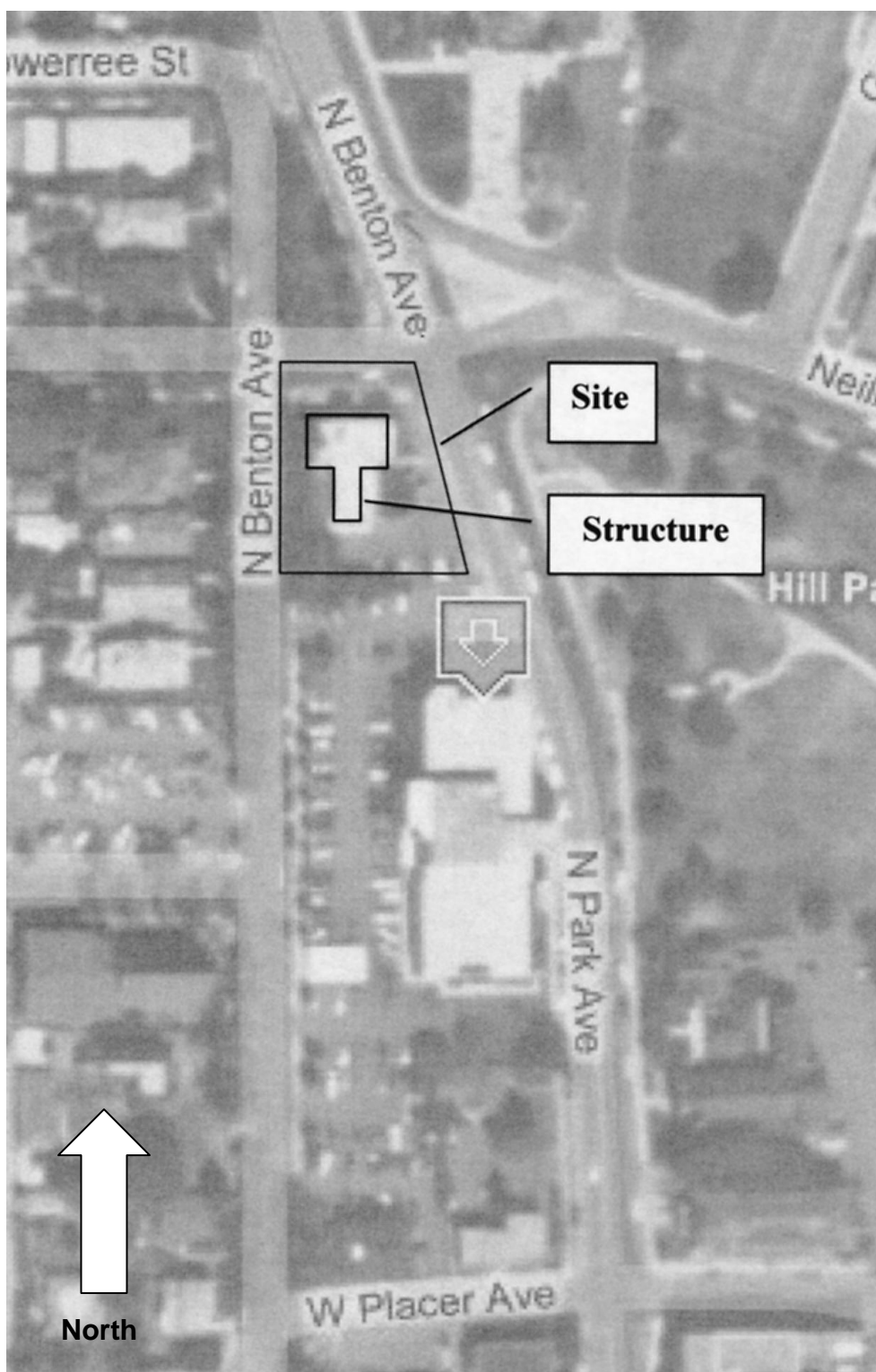


Description: **Curtain wall detail, north façade near center, November 6, 2009**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
SITE MAP

Property Name: **600 N. Park Avenue**

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MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

Property Name:

Site Number: 24 LC 2195

